



## FDOT Is Looking Down The Road With Interstate 75

By **TOM BRENNAN** The Tampa Tribune

Published: Apr 26, 2007

Any driver who's been buffeted by the wake of a passing semi or had to stomp on the brakes as traffic inexplicably ground to a standstill knows something should be done to improve Interstate 75.

Officials with the Florida Department of Transportation won't argue.

The agency has just begun a major corridor study of I-75 from Fletcher Avenue in Tampa south through Brandon and south Hillsborough County to Moccasin Wallow Road in Manatee County.

Rather than looking short term, the state is looking at finding ways to improve traffic flow for the next half century.

"This is our last chance to get it right," said Bob Clifford, who is overseeing the project for the FDOT.

Clifford said the state has a 300-foot right-of-way along the corridor that could accommodate extra lanes or some form of mass transit.

Traffic counts from 2005, the latest available, show that an average of 134,000 vehicles navigate I-75 daily in both directions north of State Road 60; 102,500 use the highway south of Fletcher; and 100,500 drive on I-75 south of Gibsonton Drive.

Clifford said his agency expects those numbers to double in the next three decades.

"Traffic in the corridor is a significant concern to us," he said.

Not only the number but also the types of vehicles must be addressed.

"As more development comes, the Interstate is going to become more of a local road at the same time as serving as a part of the regional network," Clifford said. "It has to function as both."

He anticipates more trucks will use I-75, as well as cars and minivans.

"As the Port of Tampa and Port Manatee continue to grow, particularly with container traffic, you are going to see more and more trucks on I-75," he said.

Clifford said sprouting subdivisions and apartments along traditional truck routes including U.S. 301 and U.S. 41 in the southern part of the county are forcing truckers to look elsewhere.

"They are being pushed out by the residential development," he said.

Jimmy Duffy, secretary of the SouthShore Roundtable, said a unified approach is crucial. The roundtable is a consortium of civic and business and environmental groups in south county communities.

"Residents don't care if it is a federal road, a county road or a state road," he said. "We have to focus on the whole road system."

Clifford said the first step is a traffic study, which is under way.

Clifford said the study, expected to take about two years, also will determine the best way to use available right-of-way; consider the effect noise and construction will have on people and the environment; and look for recreational opportunities within the corridor.

"And how we will be able to finance all this," he said. "We might come up with a lot of great ideas, but it will all cost a lot of money."

One thing Duffy wants included is new exits and entrances between Big Bend Road and State Road 674.

"There is currently no interchanges planned anywhere in that 5 1/2 -mile stretch," he said. "With all that growth, we want to focus on making sure that there is land and a plan for that interchange somewhere between those two roads."

Clifford said there are three lanes in each direction and an 88-foot-wide median.

He said there is room for four additional lanes, but it's not known whether they should be part of the same highway or separated for special uses, such as High Occupancy Vehicle commuter lanes or lanes for bus transit or trucks only.

He also said discussions should include the possibility of building a commuter rail in the corridor.

Clifford said the study also will analyze the feasibility of connecting interchanges with some sort of frontage road system.

"Maybe as more development comes, this is a way the Interstate can still function as a local road network," he said.

Clifford said the ultimate solution will have to include the state, local government and developers.

Clifford said residents and motorists will have many opportunities to comment through workshops, public meetings, newsletters and an Internet site.

The first newsletter should be ready within months, and the initial public meeting should be held by the end of the year.

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